Unvaccinated People in Austria Are Now Being Put in Lockdown: 'This Is a Dramatic Step'

Nicholas Rice ⋮ 4-5 minutes ⋮ 11/15/2021

Austria vaccination

Jan Hetfleisch/Getty Images

Austria is taking a major step in the fight against the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

At 12 a.m. Monday morning, the European country implemented a lockdown for all unvaccinated people ages 12 and older.

The move by the government will not allow unvaccinated people to leave their homes, unless for basic activities such as working, going to school, grocery shopping, exercising or getting vaccinated, the Associated Press reported.

Children under the age of 12, as well as individuals who have recently recovered from COVID-19, will be excluded from the lockdown. Unvaccinated people had already been barred from entertainment venues, restaurants and hairdressers, among other public areas, in the past, CNN said.

The lockdown will last for 10 days, during which Austrian authorities will monitor residents to make sure they are vaccinated, per CBS News. Unvaccinated people can be fined up to 1,450 euros (about $1,656) if they are found in violation of the new rules.

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Alexander Schallenberg

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"We really didn't take this step lightly and I don't think it should be talked down," Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg recently told Oe1 radio, according to the AP. "This is a dramatic step — about 2 million people in this country are affected. ... What we are trying is precisely to reduce contact between the unvaccinated and vaccinated to a minimum, and also contact between the unvaccinated."

"My aim is very clearly to get the unvaccinated to get themselves vaccinated and not to lock down the vaccinated," Schallenberg added. "In the long term, the way out of this vicious circle we are in — and it is a vicious circle, we are stumbling from wave to lockdown, and that can't carry on ad infinitum — is only vaccination."

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The politician's words came about as the outlet reported that only around 65% of the country's population is fully vaccinated against COVID-19. The country also currently has a seven-day infection rate of more than 800 cases per 100,000 people.

Schallenberg described the amount of Austrian residents who are currently fully vaccinated against as "shamefully low."

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The initiative has received both support and criticism among Austrians.

The BBC reported that "hundreds" protested outside the chancellery in the nation's capital of Vienna over the weekend.

There, one protester explained she was against the mandate and protesting "to fight for my rights," adding, "It is totally discriminatory what is happening here," according to the BBC.

Eva Schernhammer, a professor with the Medical University of Vienna, however, felt different, telling the outlet that the measures are necessary as hospital intensive care units are running out of space.

"It's already projected that within two weeks we'll have reached the limit," she told BBC.

As information about the coronavirus pandemic rapidly changes, PEOPLE is committed to providing the most recent data in our coverage. Some of the information in this story may have changed after publication. For the latest on COVID-19, readers are encouraged to use online resources from the CDC, WHO and local public health departments. PEOPLE has partnered with GoFundMe to raise money for the COVID-19 Relief Fund, a GoFundMe.org fundraiser to support everything from frontline responders to families in need, as well as organizations helping communities. For more information or to donate, click here.